

Brief to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women, Submitted by: Karen Gosbee,
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Chair and Members, Standing Committee on the Status of Women:

In 2017 my late husband George Gosbee passed by suicide. I came forward for two reasons: to share our family story so others could identify with my situation and feel more comfortable sharing their own; and to address the lack of resources and continuum of care in a time of need. Before I came forward, I was told by influential male leaders not to reveal I was a domestic abuse survivor because my advocacy would be discredited. I was grateful for that for the advice and believe people may have questioned my intentions when asked by the Mayor Naheed Nenshi to co-chair a [Mental Health and Addiction Strategy and Action Plan for The City of Calgary](#) from 2018 to present. Our strategy is based on creating hope and strengthening connections when one finally asks for help. Often after one makes that courageous choice to get help, it is difficult to find the help they need.

I am writing a brief in support of Bill C-233, An Act to amend the Criminal Code and the Judges Act (violence against an intimate partner). Legislation regarding the criminalization of, coercive control and manipulative behaviours.

Evan Stark best describes coercive control as,

“the controlling nature of an abusive relationship and encompasses the aspects of power in control, physical and nonphysical, with intent to harm another psychologically, financially, legally, and sexually by exerting control over another, including children shared legally or otherwise. Acknowledging coercive control as the foundation of most domestic abuse is paramount to understanding how to prevent injuries and death to adult and child victims”.

It's a well-known fact that, the most dangerous time for a woman and children is when they leave a domestic violent relationship. It is not a well-known fact that the Post Separation Abuse (PSA) intensifies post separation (Sharps-Jeff, et al., (2017) reported that when victims removed themselves from the control of an abusive partner, over 90% experienced post separation abuse. Oftentimes there is little that will prevent an offender from maintaining the position of power and control, coercive control.¹ The PSA becomes the offender's last attempt to control the adult victim, even if it's harming their own children. And exploitation of the children as proxies in the domestic abuse, the children become the best tool to retaliate against the adult victim. This is done with no regard for safety and well-being of the children.²

According to StatsCan, it is estimated more than 80% incidents involving violence towards women are never reported. I contributed to that statistic. I did not know or understand the danger I was in, but I certainly feared and intuitively knew that the lack of hope both my children and I would face if I left my marriage. According to the Violence Against Women & Children Research Program at the Australian Institute of Criminology, “one-third of male abusers who kill their female partners are high-functioning, middle-class men who were well respected in their communities and had low levels of contact with the criminal justice system”. I was constantly threatened to be destroyed, left penniless and homeless when I asked for separation and divorce. Leaving was not an option., I feared my life, my children's life, and the life of my late husband.

Acknowledging coercive control as the foundation of domestic abuse is paramount in understanding how to prevent injuries and death to adult and child victims. In the last ten years, Scotland, Ireland, England, and Wales, have expanded their domestic violence laws to include coercively controlling behaviors. The UK acknowledges that coercive control occurs between intimate party and family members; Scotland acknowledges that it continues post breakup/separation. This has been done in other countries and there are best practices to follow.

For substantive system and cultural change, criminalization of coercive control and manipulative behaviours between intimate or family relationships must be legislated to hold offenders and family court accountable. Qualified court professionals who are educated on domestic abuse, including the tactics used by coercive controllers, along with, and understanding, of the impact these traumatic experiences on the victims. Saunders, et al. (2011) found that many court professionals do not have the specific domestic abuse knowledge needed for domestic abuse custody cases and that our family court system needs to use a multi-disciplinary approach that should include domestic abuse and child abuse experts.³ DARVO, Court Sanctioned Abuse and High Conflict Separation and Divorce are the most common techniques by offender to further abuse.

DARVO - Deny, Attack, and Reverse, Victim and Offender.

When used in domestic abuse, the perpetrator denies or minimizes the harm of any wrongdoing, attacks the victim's credibility, and reverses victim and offender roles such that the perpetrator assumes a victimized position and declares the victim to be the true perpetrator. If perpetrators are charged, there needs to be solid restorative abuse programs that longer than 24 months with proven success.⁴

Court Sanctioned Abuse

A study on family court completed by Meier, et al. found that mother's claims of abuse, to herself or her children, were diminished or entirely dismissed. Alienation and counterclaims by abusers that are credited by the court result in mothers losing custody 73% of the time. When abuse has occurred, alienation accusations trump abuse.⁵

High Conflict Separation and Divorce

Research affirms that many abusers, recognize the loss of control, through separation or divorce, or fuelled by conflict.⁶ The family law system activates this trait because it's contentious. Litigation abuse often ensues, a concept that refers to an abuser's use of the legal system to keep a victim/survivor in court as long and as frequently as possible with disputes prolonged in courts backlogged. The most egregious aspect of the psychological harm further inflicted onto the already traumatized adult and child victims via a system intended to protect victims of abuse.⁷

Professional groups – including medical professionals, social workers and lawyers, EMS, and fire fighters must have continuous to date education of societal, technological, and emerging issues. Primary health care facilities and all emergency staff must have trauma informed domestic violence, and mental health professionals must have clear guidelines on the disclosure of personal information to benefit victims.

Realistically the most effective education would come from all the professions, especially those that develop a trust with their clientele: hair stylists, estheticians, personal trainers, teachers, faith-based leaders, and bankers. Educating the public to understand the dynamics of abuse is a system and cultural change

My late husband attempted suicide twice and was admitted to the psychiatric unit. There were no inquiries if the immediate family members also had trauma, nor did any officials alert their schools or community resources for myself and the children. Alberta Health Services, Social Services, EMS and Calgary Police, could work together to effectively co-manage mental health and domestic violence.

Nonfatal strangulation is the leading indicator of escalating violence and risk factor for homicide. Death increases by 750% with a nonfatal strangulation and the victim is more likely to be killed if there is an unrestricted firearm in the home. Perhaps a connection can be made by the offenders of the nonfatal strangulation attempts and gun registrations of the same individuals, or more extensive background checks of individuals having domestic violent histories when one is acquiring or renewing their gun licence?

I found my deceased husband's gun registration, after his death. He'd lied on the form to obtain it. One question: "During the past five (5) years, have you threatened or attempted suicide, or have you suffered from or been diagnosed or treated by a medical practitioner for: depression; alcohol, drug or substance mis- use; behavioural problems; or emotional problems?" he should have answered "yes" to all that, and also to this question: "During the past five (5) years, do you know if you have been reported to the police or social services for violence, threatened or attempted violence, or other conflict in your home or elsewhere?" He did not answer yes – nor were any of his health or police reports checked. His licence was renewed.

Again, if Alberta Health Services, Social Services, EMS, Police, RCMP, Canadian Firearms Program, co shared the high-risk offender data, it would greatly reduce the mental health and domestic violence emergencies.

Most women do not leave their abusive situation because of financial sustainability. They have given up their financial independence and they do not qualify for social assistance, affordable housing, or access to legal help.

Banking policies should be implemented for high-net-worth clients that require both signatures on banking documents, (alone and face to face) with a legal official, educated in domestic violence and coercive controlling behaviour. My late husband would put a piece of paper in front of me and tell me to sign. He was almost smug how he could command, and I had to comply, knowing I was silenced because there would be a dire consequence. As the executor of the estate, I had managed all my forced signatures responsible for the financial ruin he had left behind. Financial exceptions should be available for survivors, many who need financial assistance and credit rating to secure housing; connecting them to long term support services would help to facilitate their financial and personal independence.

If I understood the danger we were in, I would have taken more serious measures to leave. Quite simply, it was easier to deal with the hell I knew to protect my children, rather than take an unknown and unclear risk with limited options, most likely face poverty, then leave the abusive relationship.

In many ways I had the most desirable outcome – the children and I had our freedom. I had the freedom to help fearful, terrorized, victims identify with my story: *A Perfect Marriage; My Glittering Marriage and How it Almost Cost My Life*, and make the courageous choice to connect with the right resources and find the help they need. And finally, give the victims hope.

References

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